Depot Town Rag

Volume 22, Number 3

May 2007

You auto see the cool cars down here

100% FREE *RAG* CONTENT

A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPOT TOWN ASSOCIATION, INC. The Old Caboose, 400 Market Place, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48198

We're still waiting for the morning train

Officials are meeting with Norfolk Southern, Conrail Shared Assets, and Canadian National, the freight lines who must approve Amtrak running commuter trains again. Passengers follow freight in priority. Once agreement is reached, SEMCOG (South East Michigan Council of Governments) hopes for several stops each morning and evening in Ann Arbor, Ypsilanti, Metropolitan Airport, Dearborn, and Detroit's New Center district. Amtrak officials indicate it could take up to six months to implement the program after agreements are reached.

When the plan goes into effect, the district will face new challenges as the lot by the depot fills every day. DDA officials are meeting with a variety of sources to find additional parking within easy walking distance of the depot.

DTA can aid Ypsilanti through CDC status

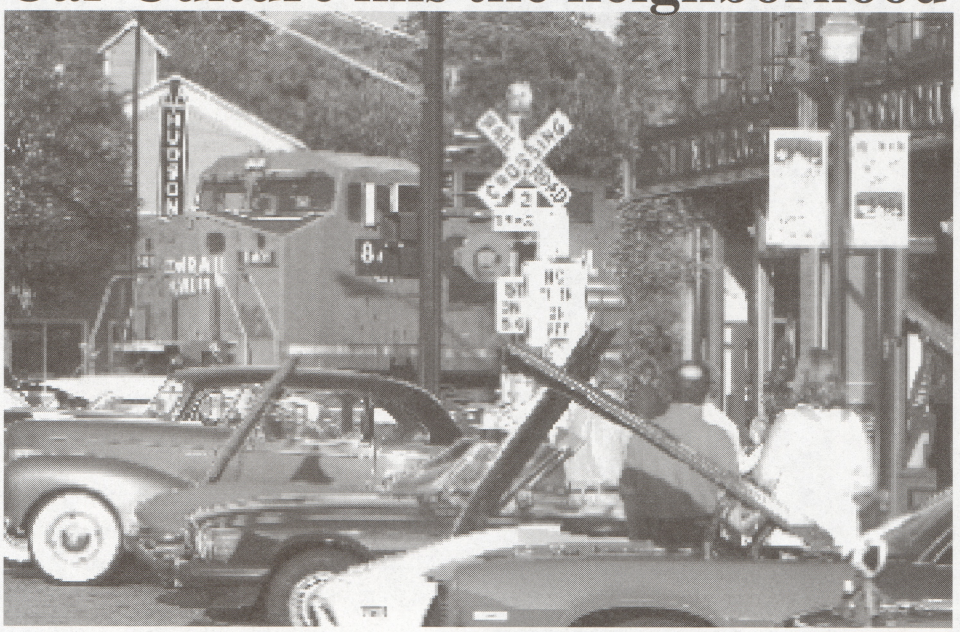
Depot Town Association officers look forward to a Community Development Corporation (CDC) that would enable more of the community to experience the kind of success realized in Depot Town the past few years. DTA will be reviewed by the IRS and the State of Michigan and DTA president Gary McKeever anticipates approval of CDC status within the next year.

Among projects to be undertaken by an Ypsilanti CDC could be renovation of the Freighthouse which has been closed for two years. Other projects could help invigorate public swimming pools, senior centers, and more upgrades in the public sector.

Frog Island garden plants new seeds

Construction has begun on the district's newest community garden at the north end of Frog Island Park that will provide plots to area residents who lack suitable land for gardening or who *[continued on page 2]*

Car Culture fills the neighborhood



Above photo by Lynda Hummel

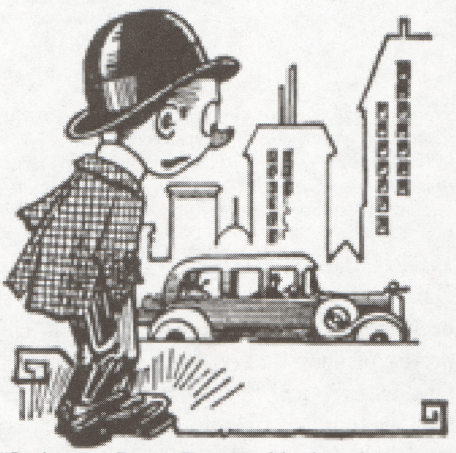
District enjoys the rebirth of an old custom

Ancient Ypsilantians tell of the days when they would drive downtown on a Friday night, angle park, and then walk up and down the sidewalks to greet everybody they had ever known. That was in the days when houses had front porches and everybody knew all the folks on their street when they went for a walk.

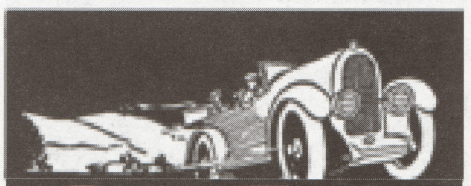
Some of that old fashioned behavior returned to Our Town when Linda French and Jack Miller encouraged local car collectors to show their stuff in the streets every Thursday evening all summer long. The street has not been the same since that project began in these streets a few years ago.

In a reversal upon that tradition, today's collection of automobiliana is backed into the curb, showing their chromed and toothy grills to pedestrians in the street. The sidewalks are used for café dining and shops still offer special sales beneath their shady awnings.

Kids giggle over ice cream cones and the community comes together...just as it has done for a long, long time now. Nothing's really changed; our engine is still running.

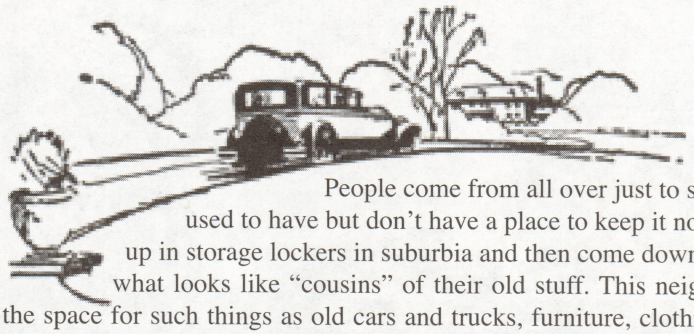


"Let's go to Depot Town and look at the cars!"



Depot Town Cruise Nights

June through September



People come from all over just to see the kind of stuff they used to have but don't have a place to keep it now. Some of them pile it up in storage lockers in suburbia and then come down to Depot Town to visit what looks like "cousins" of their old stuff. This neighborhood has provided the space for such things as old cars and trucks, furniture, clothing, jewelry, books, and friends. "Time's the test," they like to say down here, "old friends are best."

The Sobbry Bros can tell car stories

Depot Town's version of "Tappet Brothers" are not just a highly entertaining radio act; they're the real thing

The Sobbry car connection goes even further than just Depot Town. Another brother, Gary, owns Sobbry Towing at 221 N. Lincoln Street and his son, Gary Jr., teaches automotive service at Washtenaw Community College.

Bruce and Scott Sobbry could claim to be "cousins" of the National Public Radio's Car Talk hosts, but their act is not a syndicated radio show. Doing their own "Click & Clack, the Tappet Brothers" routine at City Body has been their act in Depot Town for twenty years.

City Body goes back even further than the Sobbry's ownership. The "since 1930" tag on the Hudson logo on the front of their auto shop at 20 E. Cross Street highlights that venerable business's long history in the neighborhood. It's one of the oldest businesses in the area.

Scott Sobbry's first car was a 1955 Chevrolet which he sold even before he was old enough to qualify for a driver's license. "We were country kids," he explains about growing up in York Township, "and we drove cars as soon as we were big enough to reach the pedals."

City Body repaired at least 2,340 cars in 2006 counting jobs in both the body shop and the front-end shop. With 17 employees in their garage, the Sobbrys enjoy working together. How do the brothers get along running a family business together? "We live right across the street from each other," Scott says, "and we're still each other's best friend."

Born-again Ford Mustang

Gary McKeever's 1988 Mustang GT had more than 100,000 miles on it when he decided he wanted it to "look like new" again. He contacted Ypsilanti's John Springer at a local prototype shop that replicates parts from scratch and, in nine months, McKeever's Mustang was reborn. "Dealerships don't keep replacement parts that long," says McKeever, "but we found a company in California that specializes in original equipment (OEM parts) for 1988 Mustangs that are nowhere in stock."

Historic Hudson Hornets lined the block at last summer's Cruise Nights

Frog Island gardens

[continued from page one]

simply wish to garden in a social environment. The project is headed up by members of the Riverside and Historic East Side neighborhood associations, but a number of other community members share credit for making the garden possible: neighborhood members began planning the garden in Growing Hope's Community and School Garden Development Institute in the fall of 2006, the underused area in Frog Island was suggested by the Public Works Director Bill Bohlen, and the Depot Town DDA has lent support to the project.

The gardeners will be holding work days on April 1 and April 22 to gather materials and construct fences and raised beds, and an Arbor Day dedication ceremony will be held at the garden on April 19.

All residents are welcome to participate in the garden and many hands are needed on construction days.

Slacker deal:

Get your monthly *Rag Fix* through the U.S. Postal Service. Send ten bucks to *Depot Town Association, Inc., P.O. Box 970235, Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197,* and you won't have to search the Web or walk the street.

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Changes on the block

Moving down the street:

Jennifer Bunting had been looking for a larger space for her Spa Burjon and, when Naia Venturi moved her Dreamland Theatre to a downtown location, she jumped at the chance. The remodeling at 44 East Cross is almost complete and will expand her manicure massage therapy services.

Moving in to new digs:

Candace B. Pinaud has moved her branch office of a local residential mortgage company, Metro Home Loans, into the vacated shop adjacent to City Body. "I am extremely excited about being part of Depot Town and, for the first time in my ten-year history in the real estate industry, opening my own branch office," says Pinaud.

A December graduate of EMU, she finished her 20-year quest with a BA in Finance. As Marketing/PR Director for Women's Council, she is marketing the *2007 Athena Award* of Washtenaw County.

Pinaud edits "Neighborhood Connection" for the College Heights/University Estates subdivision where she lives in one of the original farmhouses in that neighborhood. She will be co-chair of the College Heights association starting in May.

Her partner, Greg Marker, has been the City's engineer from OHM consulting engineers for the past three years.

Please stop in at 22 East Cross to welcome Candace to the neighborhood.

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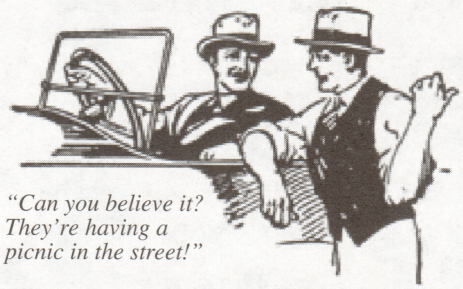
cpinaud@lenderltd.com

Yet another opportunity to sing along with neighbors

Apologies to V. Bryan and G. Edwards ("In My Merry Oldsmobile")

Come away to Depot Town
You won't need that fancy gown
If you'll spend some time with me
Such delightful sights you'll see
Surely Lansing cannot rant
Since they've closed R.E.'s old plant
Your old Olds won't take you half as far
As an historic Hudson car!



"Can you believe it? They're having a picnic in the street!"

Food on the sidewalk

- **Sidetrack Bar & Grill:**

You can't get any closer to trainwatching than the two east-side patios and a third patio on the south side under the biggest and most comfortable awning in town.

- **Aubree's Saloon:**

Great street-watching from the south side tables; advanced train-watching from Sticks' second floor deck on the north side.

- **Cady's Grill & Bar:**

North side tables right in the middle of the car shows and street action—and an almost-secret grotto in back for intimate dinners.

- **Café Luwak:**

Sidewalk tables right in the middle of the block for ice cream, sandwiches, and a taste of that famous coffee.

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True blue-collar history

Historic preservation in Depot Town goes far deeper than just old buildings. Not a neighborhood known for snobbism, this block is bookended by three museums—noted for their honest blue-collar style and content.

At the east end we exhibit Ypsilanti's contributions to the automobile industry. On the west end there's a museum of antique fire trucks. Just down the street from that museum is the Historical Society's museum all about homes and families in the community.

Only a block north of this cultural complex, right next to the Huron River, there's a staging point for the classiest antique autos for sale in the nation. A few miles to the east is an extensive exhibition of many of the airplanes that defended America in World War II.

After a tour of these local attractions, one might come away with the feeling that just about everything in Ypsilanti history was on wheels. And, when many of those wheels roll into Depot Town every Thursday evening all summer long, participants say they have a difficult time separating today's action from what some like to call The Good Old Days.

Such community support for things practical and historic makes for a great destination for folks seeking authenticity.

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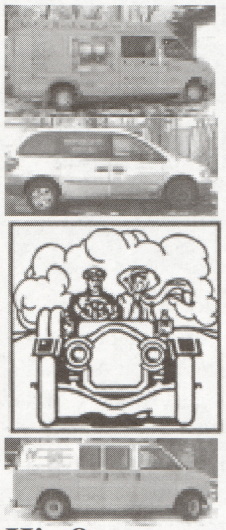
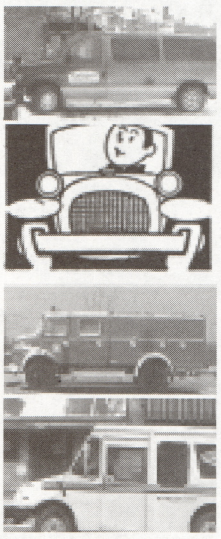
Depot Town's fleet is ubiquitous

At least 29 vehicles ply the surface routes daily with business names and/or logos emblazoned



Can you match the local business with their portion of the fleet of service vehicles?

- Utilities Instrumentation Service (15)
- Standard Printing delivery van (1)
- Sidetrack Bar & Grill, Linda French's signature '48 Hudson on River Street (1)
- Salt City Antiques treasure hauler (1)
- Lon Smith's U.S. Post Office truck (1)
- Esquire Interiors mobile window fashion studios (5)
- Enchanted Florist delivery van (1)
- Corner Brewery tanker (1) (doesn't really haul beer)
- Beer trucks (on demand, just like YPD)
- YPD (up to 13 on demand)
- Aubree's Pizza (more every week)



His first car:

Northville teenager Gerry French remembers he wasn't really into cars. "All my friends were gear-heads, but not me. When I was 16, I traded a hundred-dollar motor scooter for a 1954 four-door Ford sedan. My buddies decided it would be fun to spray paint their names all over it, but we never got to the mechanicals." That colorful sedan had "J.W. Honus" painted as a monogram on the driver's door when French traded for it, and the car went by that name for the next three years until French left for college.

It was not long after that when French became the Depot Town Association's founding president in 1976. Today, he walks to work. He will be interviewed in the August "heritage" editon of *The Rag*.

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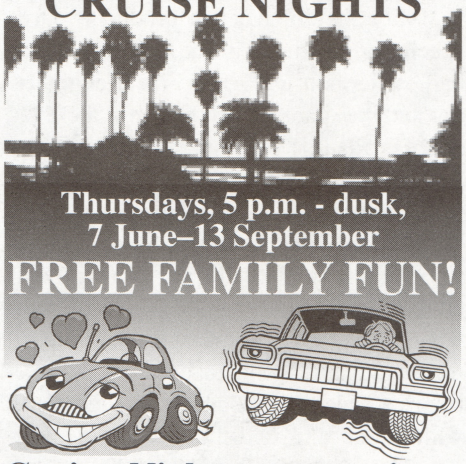
Depot Town CRUISE NIGHTS



Cruise Nights are coming... and the organizers of the every-Thursday-all-summer-long event are so enthusiastic about the new season that they hosted a fundraiser for the Ypsilanti Auto Heritage Museum last month.

Who can believe that, with hundreds of cars on exhibit and the streets closed once a week, most of the folks who are walking among the exhibits came in cars themselves—and nobody is complaining about "the parking situation"?

In the next *Rag*

We take a dip in the mighty Huron River: its origin, its history, and its many uses as the our backyard's greatest and most popular natural asset.

Depot Town Rag

"All the news that fits, we print"
A monthly publication of
the Depot Town Association, Inc.
P.O. Box 970235
Ypsilanti, Michigan 48197
To the editor:
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The Depot Town Association, Inc.

Gary McKeever, President
Mary Decker, Vice President
Ray Strassel, Treasurer
Sandee French, Scy. & Past President
Website: www.depottown.org
DTA meets at 6:30 p.m on the third Wednesday of each month at Café Luwak, 42 East Cross Street.

New record established

"100% membership, from the river to the railroad tracks," says DTA President Gary McKeever as he reviews memberships of neighborhood businesses in their local association. "I think it's the first time we've had such a full commitment for the good of the entire block," he noted in March.

March/April raffle winner was Meredy Shima from Saline. "I brought my two sisters to Cady's Grill for a birthday party," she says, "and then we went antiquing." They stopped at Gordon's for candy and at Queen of Hearts. "We remember their excellent bakery fondly from when they were in Saline," Shima says.

Shima is the mother of three daughters and works part time for an accounting firm.

She filled out her lucky coupon at Salt City Antiques, another former Saline business.

Monthly drawing COUPON (May 2007)
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Captains of the American auto industry settled here

Cars and car makers are part of our story

Henry Ford in 1933

Henry Ford

Henry Ford may have started it in Detroit, but there are many in town who remember him as "that guy who used to help out in the soybean fields east of town." The field became Willow Run Airport and Ford's famous Bomber Plant in World War II.

In his effort to recruit farmers to produce for his industry, Ford built several manufacturing mills in the area, including the dam at Ypsilanti that created Ford Lake. Both the Ypsilanti Ford and Rawsonville Ford plants were eventually converted to Visteon facilities in their final years.

Now the Ypsilanti Ford plant is closing down, but the old neighborhood keeps on.

Hudson dealership

Depot Town is home to the world's last Hudson Dealer. With records dating to 1927, a priceless part of Ypsilanti automotive history is now preserved here. Original Hudson dealer memorabilia and cars are on display at the east end of Depot Town in what were orginally the electric generating plant and the U.S. Post Office.

Henry J. Kaiser

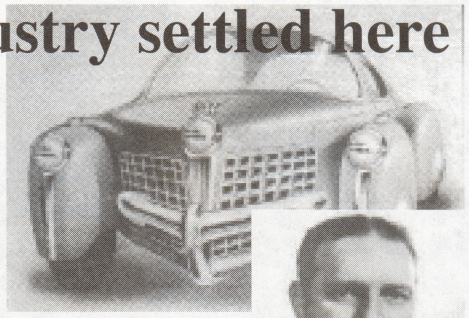
Joseph W. Frazer

Kaiser/Frazer

Henry J. Kaiser and Joseph W. Frazer purchased the gigantic Willow Run B-24 bomber plant in 1945 from the U.S. government and began production in mid-year 1946 of Kaiser and Frazer models for 1947. 1953 saw the last Kaiser cars produced at Willow Run as production was moved to Toledo, Ohio.

General Motors

In 1956 Chevrolet began producing large special order trucks in the building which had earlier housed Kaiser/Frazer engineering and the spare parts facility for the B-24 Bomber Plant. This plant was added on to several times, first for the manufacture of the Corvair from 1959 to 1969 and then for the Nova, Ventura, Omega, Skylark series of GM cars. In 1980, the plant was converted to production of the GM X-series front-wheel-drive cars. The last cars produced there were the second generation Chevrolet Caprice sedans and station wagons along with Buick and Oldsmobile station wagons. The plant was closed in 1993.



Preston Tucker 1903-1956

Preston Tucker

Preston Tucker was a local kid with big ideas and dreams—so big, in fact, that he terrified the "Big Three" major American auto companies. "He was a visionary in the automotive world creating a car so far ahead of its time that we still have not caught up," says Richard D. Cole on his Website, www.richardcole.com.

Although he was driven from the business, Tucker's 1950s concepts of automobile safety have been gradually appearing in his competitor's later products.

"Furthermore," says Cole, "and probably more to the reason why I admire him so, he was a rebel... I wish we had more men like Preston Tucker in this country."

Tucker's home on Lincoln Street, a block south and east of Depot Town

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As soon as we delivered cars to Chicago by train, they turned around and started coming back along Michigan Avenue—perhaps the longest singly-named road in America.

Saturday 19 May

Ypsilanti PRIDE Day

Let's clean up our act!

It's an annual event that helps us keep lookin' good

Dearie, do you remember...

...what Ypsilanti's "P.R.I.D.E." acronym was all about? That *verbatim* phrase may be lost to many, but the ethic of helping to clean up our neighborhoods continues.

Which of the following phrases do you feel best recalls the original slogan?

1. Please Resist Ideas During Expansion
2. Public Relations Involves Destroying almost Everything
3. Pardon Relatives' Idiocy Defending Eccentricity
4. Puny Regressive Initiatives Diminish Excellence
5. Preserving, Restoring Image and Developing the Environment.

(It's #5, of course. You knew that, didn't you?)

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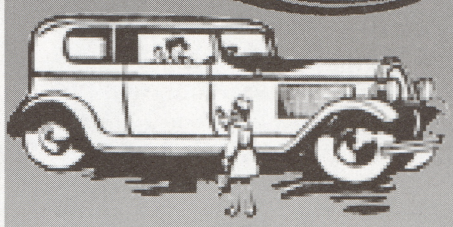

6 May
Show & Shine Street Rod Show

13 May
Michigan Vintage Volkswagen Festival

28 May
Memorial Day Parade

3 June
Orphan Car Show

7 June – 13 September
Depot Town Cruise Nights

29, 30 June
Camaro Superfest 2007

13, 14 July
Michigan ElvisFest

27, 28 July
Summer Beer Festival

11-17 August
United Association of Plumbers & Pipefitters

17, 18, 19 August
Ypsilanti Heritage Festival

25 August
Annual Fire Truck Muster

7 October
Antique Truck Show

Related events in nearby Ann Arbor:

8 July
Rolling Sculpture Show

Front Yard Parking Lots on Football Saturdays

The city's sign (at the top) points to public parking but it's at the other end of the alley. All the other signs at this spot indicate "reserved," "private," or "permit" parking. It can cost you $140 just to get your car off the lift, notes a volunteer from last year's Heritage Festival.

Parking problems?

Just a few short years ago, the biggest parking problem in the district was that nobody wanted to park down here. Merchants used to park in front of their own stores and wonder why nobody came in.

All that has changed now. Today, parking proliferates on the street and in paved off-street lots. A few places are marked "reserved" for upstairs tenants, but public parking is clearly posted (except in the instance illustrated above).

News Notes:

Weekly *Courier* moves office to Belleville

Neither rain nor sleet nor gloom of night can stay the *courier* from its appointed rounds, according to the United States Postal Service motto. But that does not deter Ypsilanti's weekly *Courier* newspaper. They closed their Michigan Avenue office and have been operating out of Belleville since January 1.

With our daily newspaper shrinking and the weekly newspaper moving out of town, some locals say they find much of their local news in that little monthly rag down by the depot.